

China's Strategic Narratives

Doris Vogl

Why are strategic narratives relevant in the context of security-related assessment? The answers are manifold: First of all, the study of the strategic narratives of a second party will always help to explain “how existing and emerging powers seek to impose a shared meaning of how the international order does, or should, function.”¹ Secondly, thorough knowledge on meta-narratives facilitates the understanding of multiple sub-narratives, relevant to the strategic level. Thirdly, situational assessment is geared towards decision making. Considering the narratives of the other side will definitely include a substantial element in the decision-making process.

Last but not least, the strategic narratives of the other side may be tested against realities on the ground and possible identified contradictions may be put forward by the European side in ongoing bilateral negotiations. At this point it should be noted that the identification of contradictions within Chinese official discourse patterns constitutes a well-established and extensively used argumentation method. In the same vein, Brussels may always draw on the Deng Xiaoping maxim “Seek truth from facts” (shi shi qiu shi), which has not lost its discursive importance to this day.

Eclipsed strategic narratives

According to The Free Dictionary, “eclipse” is synonymous for “the partial or complete obscuring, relative to a designated observer, of one celestial body by another” (<https://www.thefreedictionary.com>). This is exactly the case for the overwhelming majority of western publications on the People's Republic of China: Official Chinese narratives remain in the shadow, on the “dark side of the moon.” Irrespective of the thematic subject – may it be international relations in a wider sense, the Belt & Road Initiative or great power competition – the global actor China is regarded and commented through the lens of Western narratives. For years, a small minority of western

¹ Alister Miskimmon and Ben O'Loughlin, “Russias Narratives of Global Order - Great Power Legacies in a Polycentric World,” in *Politics and Governance* (2017/3), 113 (111-20).

researchers has been deploring the disinterest in non-Western terminology and related narratives, due to the solely Western categorization of international affairs.² Particularly, the professional community of sinologists has put a strong emphasis on their concerned demand to pay more attention to official Chinese narratives.³

A main intention of this publication is to step out of the current mainstream approach and shift the spotlight to the rather unexplored “other side”. In this spirit, the first part of the book introduces and reflects a number of official narratives, as channelled and supported by the political leadership of the PR China in the sphere of international relations. In the second part of the book, the implementation aspect of the presented narratives is tested against realities on the ground. The final part is dedicated to analytical conclusions drawn from geographical case studies.

There is abundant literature and research in the thematic context of the Belt & Road Initiative (BRI). This publication does not place a thematic focus on the BRI but takes a closer look at the related “Health Silk Road” narrative, which was created against the backdrop of the global pandemic situation in 2020. In the second part of the book, several authors present their analyses, including observations as to which extent and in what form the Belt & Road Initiative has triggered expectations and produced concrete results within BRI participant nations. In addition, the second part examines how far Chinese strategic narratives are implemented and reflected in bilateral relations.

² Emilian Kavalski, „The Guanxi of Relational International Affairs,“ in *Chinese Political Science Review* (2018/3), 233-51; Pinar Bilgin, *The International in Security, Security in the International*, Routledge 2017; Louiza Odysseos, *The Subject of Coexistence: Otherness in International Relations*, University of Minnesota (ed.), 2007.

³ Thomas Heberer, “The Chinese ‘Developmental State 3.0’ and the resilience of authoritarianism,” in *Journal of Chinese Governance* (2016/1), 611-32; Harro von Senger, *Moulië – Supraplanung, Unerkannte Denkhorizonte aus dem Reich der Mitte*, Hanser, München 2018; Chih-yu Shih, *Harmonious Intervention: China’s Quest for Relational Security*, Surrey: Ashgate 2014.

Characteristics of Chinese strategic narratives

In the world of international relations, the leading political institutions of the PR China pay considerable attention to official strategic narratives. Even though their messages are addressed to the outside world, their objectives are also of systemic relevance inside China. Establishing norms und building up a reputation abroad also entails a certain impact on domestic public opinion. All official narratives cultivate norms that present China's relations to other countries in a favourable light.

Recent years have seen a slight shift as to the main objective of official narratives. In the "New Era" – as declared by the 19th National Congress of the CPC in November 2017 - building an international reputation as a generous, kind and competent actor has become secondary to the aim of gaining a global standing as a responsible, resolved and assertive global power. Nevertheless, there is a prevailing focus on continuity to be found in Chinese IR narratives. Certain characteristics of most Chinese strategic narratives in the field of international relations are noteworthy and listed below:

Long-term Projection and Homogeneity

Even though there have always been several leading political groups in the People's Republic, only one homogeneous narrative is officially released to the world. To some extent, this salient feature of homogeneity is intended to demonstrate the unity of political leadership. This should not lead to the assumption that in the process of developing strategic narratives, critical and dissenting voices are not taken into account. The usual breeding grounds for internal criticism of the system and the narratives are the Academy of Sciences, universities or the working committees of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC).⁴

⁴ According to official statements, the CPPCC National Committee collects opinions from different social domains and acts as a consultative body for national decision making under the control of the CCP. See link: http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-03/03/c_136098744.htm. The CPPCC has listed 536 seats for political parties, 97 of which are held by the CCP, 377 seats are reserved for the so-called "Eight Democratic Parties," and 62 seats are assigned to independent members. The remaining 1,664 CPPCC-seats are held by organisations and sectoral representatives.

Another feature of the Chinese narratives is their long-term projection and validity. Despite the declaration of a “New Era” by the 19th CPC National Congress in November 2017, the guiding narratives for international relations have not been subject to any major changes over the past years. There are still narratives in place dating back to Zhou Enlai, who served as foreign minister⁵ from 1949 to 1958 during the early Maoist era: For example, the diplomatic guidelines of “mutual respect” between opposing political systems or “abstention from interference” in the internal affairs of another country. Both principles were enshrined in the final communiqué of the historical Bandung Conference (18-24 April 1955) in Indonesia. For more than seven decades, Beijing has been drawing on the official narrative of unbroken solidarity with the global South against hegemonism and neo-colonialism. China considers itself as part of the global South, despite its new status as a major global power (the subject of South-South cooperation will be further discussed in Part III).

Inclusiveness

Another noteworthy characteristic feature of the People’s Republic strategic narratives is inclusiveness. During recent years, the Belt & Road Initiative has been presented as the most illustrative example of an inclusive long-term vision: a global infrastructure development project, which is open to any country via the Export-Import Bank of China (China Eximbank) or the multilateral AIIB (Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank). The sole reason for Beijing to exclude an applicant for funding is the rejection of the One-China-Policy.

The reasons for inclusiveness lie in the first foreign policy-related narrative, which is based on the strategic objective to offer an attractive “contrast pattern” to Western normative requirements and places a strong focus on development programs and financing. Theoretically, all countries – including those classified as rogue states in the Western hemisphere, e.g. Iran or Lesotho – are entitled to participate in the BRI development projects. In this

⁵ In October 1949, Zhou was appointed both Premier of the Government Administration Council and Minister of Foreign Affairs, quickly earning a reputation as the architect of early PRC foreign policy.

context, among other things, Western embargo policies are effectively thwarted.

Apart from the systemic approach, in contemporary Chinese theorizing, considerable importance is attached to the civilizational aspect of inclusiveness. It should therefore come as no surprise that Beijing has always taken the role of a determined opponent since the early 1990s, against the mainstream “Clash of Civilizations” thesis. The underlying critique is that China, as a secular, non-religion-based civilization is more tolerant than the West and the Islamic world and therefore not aiming at “transforming” other civilizations:

...from the cultural point of view, China’s secular culture is highly inclusive. Both the Western and Islamic civilizations are religion-based civilizations, which have a strong impulse to transform others. The Chinese civilization is, on the contrary, the only secular one in the world; its openness and inclusiveness are far greater than those exclusive religion-based civilizations.⁶

There is sufficient evidence that the claimed openness and inclusiveness has its limits in the name of cultural identity or under the banner of national security. As a matter of fact, Chinese social science communities are currently analysing the “European refugee crisis” in every detail; but so far, the People’s Republic state authorities could not bring themselves to comply with the UNHCR’s request to take in more refugees from war and crisis regions.⁷

The relevance and characteristics of Chinese strategic narratives were already outlined at an introductory level. The following text aims to create a better understanding for several relevant Chinese IR narratives, like the anti-hegemonistic narrative, the “Health Silk Road” narrative, and the narrative of “Moral Leadership”. The subject of anti-hegemonism always comes into

⁶ Zheng Yongnian/Zhang Chi: “China’s International Strategic Choice in the Wave of Deglobalization,” in: Institute for Strategic Studies, National Defence University of PLA China (ed.), *International Strategic Relations and China’s National Security*, Vol. 3, Singapore 2018, 330.

⁷ During recent years, the PR China has become an emerging destination and transit country for refugees but continues to emphasize addressing root causes in countries of origin as solution to the global refugee crisis. The PRC shows little readiness to prioritise or enhance refugee protection or integration on Chinese territory.

play when opponents define and discuss their spheres of influence. Thus, the exploration of Chinese strategic narratives in the field of international relations, is opened by the narrative of China as an “anti-hegemonic global actor”.

Strategic narratives and the normative space

Geostrategic competition includes the normative space; the same applies to areas of cooperation. Over the past few years, the discourse on normative space has gained noticeable importance and undergone dynamic development. Specifically in the field of security policy-related analysis, normative *pouvoir* is becoming increasingly important against this background. Therefore, it seems expedient to address the normative space in addition to the geographical, geostrategic areas and Cyberspace.

What is the relation between narratives and the normative space? It is of fundamental relevance: Narratives are the daily and monthly “fodder” that needs to be fed, no matter whether into the analog or digital sphere. And it is especially the strategic narratives that feed and shape the coordinates of the normative space.

For decades, Chinese social scientists had been complaining loudly that China is lagging a long way behind in the normative space compared to Western countries. The lack of genuine Chinese theory or vision had been identified and deplored, particularly in the sphere of international relations.⁸ Since the mid-2000s, Joseph Nye’s “Soft Power” theory had been explored extensively by Chinese analysts and was finally mainstreamed to read “soft power with Chinese characteristics”. Yet, under the presidency of Hu Jintao, the PR China was still far from having developed its own strategic narratives of major international relevance. In 2009, a report of the US think tank CSIS (Center for Strategic & International Studies) came to following conclusion:

Despite intense interest at the highest circles, China has yet to develop a comprehensive, coherent national soft-power strategy, although there are disparate policies towards this end. China’s soft-power policy remains largely

⁸ See: Yaqing Qin (2007), “Why is there No Chinese International Theory?”, in: *International Relations of the Asia Pacific* (2007/3), 313-40.

ad hoc and primarily reactive, aiming to counter the China-threat theory and improve China's image abroad.⁹

One decade later, the Xi Jinping era already presents a somehow different picture. In addition to the already existing long-term narrative of the PR China as an advocate for anti-hegemonism, several new narratives have been launched in the international soft-power arena. A “primarily reactive” method of operation has been transformed into a proactive approach. It goes without saying that the Western perception of this approach as an expansive penetration into the global normative space is considered by Beijing as finally “catching up” with a blatant dominance of Western narratives.

In the context of this publication three strategic narratives of the Xi Jinping era seem worth mentioning:

- Within UN structures, the narrative of the “community with a shared future for mankind” has already found its way into several UN resolutions.¹⁰ On a diplomatic level it has been widely accepted in countries of the global South and blended into a larger number of bilateral agreements between the PR China and developing nations. It is strategically well-considered and by no means coincidental that the Chinese position paper for the 75th UN General Assembly of 10 Sep 2020 closes with a declaration of intent on the respective narrative:

China will work with countries around the world to uphold and carry forward multilateralism, join the UN on a new journey with renewed commitments, and build a community with a shared future for mankind.¹¹

⁹ Bonnie S. Glaser and Melissa E. Murphy (2009), “Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics – The Ongoing Debate,” 10-26, in: ed. Carola McGiffert, *Chinese soft power and its implications for the United States: competition and cooperation in the developing world*, a report of the CSIS smart power initiative, March 2009.

¹⁰ 55th UN Commission for Social Development (February 11, 2017), *Social Dimensions of the New Partnership for Africa's Development*; 72nd UN-General Assembly, First Committee for Disarmament and International Security (November 2, 2017), *No first placement of weapons in outer space* and *Further practical measures for the prevention of an arms race in outer space*.

¹¹ Position Paper of the People's Republic of China on the 75th Anniversary of the United Nations, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1813751.shtml.

- In the framework of the Belt & Road Initiative the narrative of the “mutual benefit and win-win strategy” proposes a new developmental approach, with a strong focus on equality and the economic support of developing nations. Nevertheless, the wording “mutual benefit and win-win strategy” can be found in bilateral agreements with industrial BRI partner countries as well. The normative orientation of this narrative is easily depicted: It includes the idealized picture of economic fairness, despite an asymmetric power balance.
- The third strategic narrative of international significance portrays China as a “responsible great power”. Yan Xuetong, professor of International Relations at Beijing Tsinghua University, is one of the founders of this narrative, with his underlying theory of moral realism. According to this theory, the performance of moral responsibility in domestic and international politics increases the leverage of a state on the international community. Yan Xuetong’s concept implies that the international order can be more effectively re-shaped by setting good examples instead of using coercion. Furthermore, the theory of moral realism postulates that the dynamics of world order and international stability are influenced and even determined by the moral qualities of major powers.¹²

The latter narrative can claim outstanding international attention. The publications of Yan Xuetong are debated in scientific journals and think tanks, around the world. The underlying postulate of “moral realism” has

¹² Xuetong Yan (2014), “Theory of International Relations of Moral Realism,” in *International Studies* (2014/5), 102-27; Xuetong Yan (2016), “Political Leadership and Power Redistribution,” in *Chinese Journal of International Politics* (2016/9), 1-26, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/pow002>; Xuetong Yan (2019) “Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers,” *Princeton University Press*.

also found its way into security policy-related studies.¹³ Johannes Berchtold offers a comprehensive examination in regard to the contradiction between the moral claims and real political orientation of Chinese narratives.

With regard to “successful” narrative settings, there appears to be a certain trend on the Chinese side to anchor and roll out even the smallest advance in the normative space. As Sophie Boisseau du Rocher notes in the Belt & Road Initiative IFRI-study of June 2020:

Most Chinese projects are now labelled BRI projects, even if their negotiation and implementation began earlier: overall, the BRI has become a mix of old and new projects, all benefiting from the impulse given by the new branding.¹⁴

It can be assumed that, in the light of growing rivalry in the normative space, this trend will continue to gain momentum. The recent revocation of the broadcasting license for the Chinese state-run TV broadcaster CGTV in England is one of the indicators for the increasing struggle for normative space.

¹³ Michael D. Swaine (2018), “Chinese Views of Foreign Policy in the 19th Party Congress,” in *China Leadership Monitor*, Nr. 55; Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress, Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2019*; https://media.defense.gov/2019/May/02/2002127082/-1/-1/1/2019_CHINA_MILITARY_POWER_REPORT.pdf; Deborah Welch Larson (2020), “Can China Change the International System? The Role of Moral Leadership,” in *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 163-86, doi: 10.1093/cjip/poaa002; Jannika Brostrom (2016), “Morality and the National Interest: Towards a ‘Moral Realist’ Research Agenda,” in *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* (29/4), 1624-39.

¹⁴ Sophie Boisseau du Rocher (2020), “The Belt and Road: China’s ‘Community of Destiny’ for Southeast Asia?” in *Asie. Visions* (2020/113), IFRI, 19.